NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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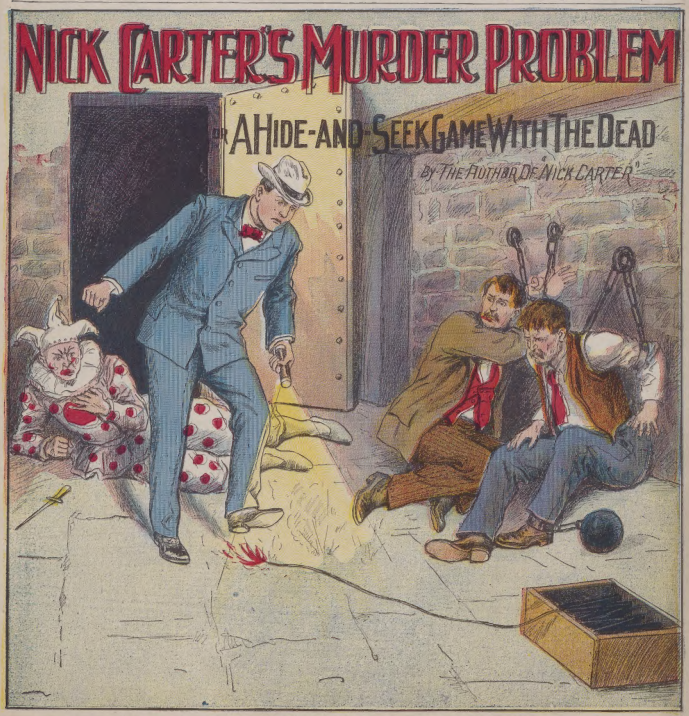
No. 483 NEW YORK, MARCH 31, 1906. Price, Five Cents

NICK CARTER'S MURDER PROBLEM

OR A HIDE-AND-SEEK GAME WITH THE DEAD

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



Securely chained to the wall were two other men, while between them and the detective something smoked, and one glance told Nick that it was a rapidly burning fuse.

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NICK CARTER'S MURDER PROBLEM

OR,

A Hide-and-Seek Game With the Dead.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE HAUNTED MANSION MYSTERY.

"Are you Mr. Carter?"

"Yes, sir."

"Nicholas Carter?"

"Yes, sir."

"The detective?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No, sir."

The detective was smiling broadly by this time, notwithstanding the fact that his rather bucolic interlocutor was frowning.

"It is no laughing matter, Mr. Carter, I beg you to understand," the man blurted out at him, perceiving that Nick was vastly amused.

"I suppose not—if it is a real ghost."

"A real ghost! Say! If it isn't a real ghost, it's the devil himself. But, sir, as I said before, it's no laughing matter. It is *murder!*"

"Murder?"

"Yes; just that. This time it's murder."

"You speak as if there had been other times; other visitations; other occasions when you have believed that you were troubled by a ghost."

"Other times? There have been dozens of them. Look here, Mr. Carter, I have heard great things about you. I have been told that there is nothing in your line that you cannot accomplish, from rounding up horse thieves and bringing murderers to the electric chair, to laying ghosts."

"I believe that I have earned some reputation in the pursuit of my profession," replied the detective, smiling; "and I apprehend that you are seeking my services in the hope that I can 'lay' the ghost that is troubling you."

"That is the idea—precisely. I suppose you know who I am?"

"Your card told me that, when my servant brought it to me."

"Exactly; but it didn't tell you *all* about me, did it?"

"No. Your reputation has told me the rest."

"Well, I'm Jones; Jeremy Jones. I am a rich man; a capitalist; a banker; broker; financier; and so forth. You knew all that before, I suppose."

"Yes; I knew all that before."

"I live in a house—or rather a mansion—that I built myself, at number thirty-two Bulfinch Terrace. Bulfinch Terrace is a little, short street that I had cut through my own land at my own expense, up on Washington Heights; and——"

"Yes; I know about that, also."

"Do you? Well, I built two houses just alike, there. They are directly opposite each other; and they are both of them large, square, granite houses, three stories high, built by day's labor, and are just about as near perfect as houses can be."

"So I have been told; so, in fact, I know of my own knowledge, for in passing that way, just before they were completed, I used the occasion to go through one of them."

"Which one was that, Mr. Carter?"

"The one in which you are living. If I do not mistake, the other one has remained unoccupied since it was built."

"Huh!" said Mr. Jones; and was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"That is exactly what I have come here to talk about. You see, it was this way: It is rather unpleasant to talk about, but I suppose the only thing for me to do, if you are to engage yourself in my services, is to tell you everything; eh?"

"Always tell your doctor, your lawyer, and your detective the truth, the whole truth, and as much more that bears upon the case, as you can," replied Nick, smiling.

"Well, it was this way: I built the two houses just alike in every particular. When they were completed, and I figured up the cost of them, there wasn't a hundred dollars' difference between them. The one I live in is the one I built for myself; the other one was built for my son—Jeremy Jones, junior. Do you know about that, too?"

"I think you had better tell me your own version about that, Mr. Jones."

"So do I."

The old gentleman was silent a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, and then he continued:

"I had always taken great pride in my son, Mr. Carter. I was very proud of him. He manifested unusual business talent, he had good habits, a genial disposition, and a sunny nature. He was tall, well-built, handsome—and all that. In fact, in my opinion, he was just about *it*. Just about what I figured that a son should be, who was destined to inherit his father's millions, to succeed him in business, and to carry out and uphold his reputation through a succeeding generation, and train the others that were to follow, along the same lines. So I erected that house for him—number thirty-three—just like my own.

"Jere disappointed me. The blow he dealt me, fell all of a sudden, and totally without warning. I wasn't prepared for it in the least—and I suppose I have never entirely recovered from it.

"It has made me cross and crabbed; out of sorts; ruined my disposition, and rendered me a disappointed man. However, we won't dwell upon that part of it."

"But that is why the house has never been occupied?"

"Wait. That is part of my story. It is why the house was not occupied for the two years that followed upon its completion. I just shut the thing up, and said that nobody should live in it at all; that I had built it for my son, and that it should stand vacant as long as I lived, as a constant reminder of the wrong he had done his father.

"Five years have passed since those houses were completed—since that particular one was ready for occupancy—and, therefore, it is five years—yesterday it was—since I last saw my son.

"For two years I didn't go near that house; I never went across to that side of the street at all; I never looked in that direction, if I could help it, although sometimes I did so before I thought what I was doing; and by the way, it was on one of those occasions that I first discovered a will-o'-the-wisp sort of a light flickering around one of the windows. They were all boarded up, of course, but I could see the light through the cracks—or rather the checks—in the boards, for all that.

"But I'm getting ahead of my story. I wish to tell it consecutively, if I can."

"Yes; that will be better."

"For two whole years, then, the house stood idle. It was fully furnished, mind you; ready to live in."

Nick nodded his head.

"I never went near it; none of my family ever went near it—that is, I forbade them to do so, and I suppose they obeyed me. But at the end of the two years it occurred to me that I was making a monumental ass of myself, and that I might just as well let the house to a good tenant, and thus derive an income from it, as to have it stand there idle; and besides, Mr. Carter, I had seen those lights that I am presently going to tell you about, a lot of times, and they puzzled me.

"I made up my mind that it would be better if somebody lived in the house. The thing was getting on my nerves—and so, I found a tenant."

"You did?"

"Yes. He stayed there a week—and then he moved out. After a little while I found another tenant. He

remained there two weeks, and then he gave me the worst calling down I ever had in my life, and *he* moved out—madder'n a hornet, too!"

"Well?"

"I let him go—and after awhile, I found a third tenant. He stayed there a month, at the end of which time he sent me a letter from the St. Regis Hotel, where he had gone with his family, and in that letter he suggested several very unpleasant things that I could do with my house if I wanted to, but that the one thing that I could not do would be to induce him or anybody else to live in it.

"Well, I let him go, too; and I left the house alone for a time.

"But after rather more than another year had passed, a man whom I knew fairly well from having met him in business two or three times, came to me and said he wanted the house. He asked me, in fact, if I would let it.

"'The house is haunted,' I told him; but he only laughed at me, after which he asked me what sort of ghost haunted it. I told him I didn't know; and then I told him the history of my efforts to keep it occupied. I made him thoroughly understand that a month was the longest time that I had succeeded in keeping a tenant in the house, and that each time when they went out, they were as mad as a wet hen at me, and that not one of them would discuss the matter with me at all, or tell me what was the matter.

"I didn't keep a thing back from him, Carter; but the more I told him, the more he laughed at me—and it all ended by his taking the house."

The old gentleman heaved a sigh that came from the depths of his heart, and then he added:

"He stayed exactly six weeks—to a day."

The detective remained silent, and after a moment, Mr. Jones went on:

"After that I made no effort to let the house at all. I had two or three opportunities to do so. Agents approached me on the subject, and several gentlemen tried to engage the house, but I said no to every mother's son of them; told them I wouldn't let the house at any price.

"At last—about six months ago—a man by the name of Parsons came to me. I said no; but he insisted. I told him the story, and he insisted the more. He finally got the house at his own figures—and he remained in it just one night. I haven't seen him since. He didn't even return for the money he had paid me in advance, as the others had done.

"I was getting used to the thing by that time, and I found a grim sort of humor in the experiences I was having; and so when the next applicant appeared, and asked if I would let the house, I replied:

"'Yes; I will let the house if you think that you want it after I have told you the story about it; and on the condition that after you have heard the story, if you still insist upon taking it, you will make an iron-clad agreement to live in it for one year at least, and the consideration for that agreement will be that you can have the house rent-free for the first year.'

"Well, Carter, the young fellow—he was a youngster, just married—jumped at the chance. He took the house and signed a lease for five years, rent-free for the first year, and a ridiculously low rate for the four succeeding ones.

"I went through the house with him—the first and only time that I had entered it at all, since its completion. I found it in perfect order. The furniture was all there, as I have said, even to the silver. He took possession just a week ago to-day, and went in with his wife and servants."

"Well?" asked the detective.

"Well, Carter, here is the horror of it all. For the last three days we have not seen a sign of life about the house, and this morning I crossed the street, and, after ringing the bell for half-an-hour, called my coachman and gardener, and forced my way inside; and I found——"

"Well?"

"I found that young man and his bride, dead. They had been murdered."

CHAPTER II.

A HOUSE OF MYSTERY.

During the recital of the interesting story told by Jeremy Jones about the difficulties he had experienced in letting his house, Nick Carter had almost forgotten that the word "murder" had already been mentioned, and, now, when it came as a climax to the story, it was rather startling.

The old gentleman had said, quite calmly: "I found the young man and his bride, dead. They had been murdered."

He uttered the two sentences without emotion; as if he had meditated upon them, while on his way to the house of the detective; as if he had repeated them over and over to himself, many times, in order to learn exactly how they would sound when they were uttered aloud.

The detective glanced hastily at the clock on the mantel. It was not eight in the morning as yet, and he suddenly recalled the fact that Mr. Jones had called him from the breakfast table—an incident that he had almost forgotten in the excitement of the story that had been told.

The attitude and expression of the old gentleman, now that the murder was out, was that of one who had completed his duty in telling what he knew, and that now he washed his hands of it. It was one of weariness over the whole thing and as if in the telling he had relieved

himself of a burden which he was quite willing that others should bear in the future.

"What time was it when you broke into the house, this morning?" Nick asked, after a short pause, during which he had been thinking deeply.

"Half-past six."

"Why did you undertake to rouse the people there at that early hour, when you must have known that they would not have risen, even if they were there?"

"I had stood the strain of the thing just as long as I could bear it."

"Do you mean that you apprehended something of the nature of what, in fact, you found?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I could not answer that question. I felt it in my bones, that is all."

"You felt that the climax had come."

"Just that."

"To be exact, just how many days have passed since you saw signs of life about that house? Do you know exactly?"

"Three."

"And who did you last see?"

"I saw Mr. and Mrs. Gardner—both of them."

"At what time of day was that?"

"In the morning—about half-past eight."

"Where were they?"

"At the front door. They came out of the house together. They came down the steps and walked away from the house together. They went toward the avenue, and I concluded that he was starting down-town, and that she was going to do some marketing. I don't know all that; I only guess at it."

"What was the full name of the man?"

"Franklin Gardner. His wife was named Etta; at least I have heard him call her by that name."

"Where were they from?"

"Boston."

"Was Mr. Gardner in business in the city?"

"No. He had no business, although he maintained an office down-town where he received and answered his correspondence. He has not been there during the three days I have mentioned."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I went there and inquired."

"When?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Who did you see there?"

"A young lady stenographer."

"And she had not seen her employer?"

"No; nor heard from him."

"Did she regard that as remarkable?"

"She did not seem to do so. She said that he often remained away——"

"But I understood you to say that he had only lived in the city a week."

"I said that he had only lived in my house a week. As a matter of fact, they have lived in the city ever since their marriage, four months ago. They were at a hotel before they took my house."

"So the stenographer thought nothing strange about his absence from his office, eh?"

"No. I don't think she thought especially much about anything; I don't think she has brains enough to do much thinking."

"Am I to understand that during these three days you have seen no sign of life about the mansion at all?"

"You are."

"Where were the servants? You mentioned them a moment ago."

"I haven't the least idea."

"How many were there in the house?"

"Three, I think. I am not sure."

"And did anybody live with the young married couple besides the servants?"

"I think not."

"What did you do after you found the two dead bodies in the house?"

"I came here after you."

"Do you mean that you have not reported the circumstances to anybody at all?"

"I do."

"But you took two of your own servants into the house with you."

"No; only one. I sent the gardener away as soon as the door was opened. It occurred to me that I did not care to have too many with me, and I know that I can trust my coachman."

"The coachman entered the house with you?"

"Yes."

"Did he see the bodies?"

"He was beside me when we made the discovery."

"And then both of you left the house, at once, and together?"

"We did."

"You did not stop to search the rest of the house?"

"I did not."

"So you don't know whether the servants were also murdered or not?"

"I know just what I have told you—no more; no less."

"How had the man and the woman been killed?"

"I don't know."

"Could you not tell by looking at them, whether they had been stabbed or shot, or what means had been used to kill them?"

"No; I couldn't tell anything about it. I only know that they were dead, and that they had been dead some

time. Both of them were stone cold and stiff, and already there was an unpleasant odor about the place."

"Where is your coachman now? What did you order him to do when you came away?"

"I told him to go back to the stables and to act as if nothing had happened; and I directed him to say absolutely nothing about the circumstances until I gave him leave to do so. He will obey me, too."

"Well," said Nick, after he had thought a few moments in silence about the matter, "since no knowledge of the affair has got out at all, it will be just as well if we linger here long enough for me to post myself thoroughly about the case, before we go to the house."

"I think so too, sir."

"What has become of your son?"

"What the devil has he got to do with it?"

"Nothing at all, most likely; but if you wish me to take any interest in your case at all, you will reply to my questions as I ask them without asking what they are for, and without commenting upon their possible bearing on the case."

"All right. Go ahead. I'll do it. But you may as well understand at the start, Mr. Carter, that any mention of my son drives the iron into my heart. I have schooled myself never to mention his name, and I have not permitted the members of my family to mention it in my presence."

"I will spare you all I can. But since you have been explicit, so will I be so."

"Thank you."

"I shall be obliged to ask you some questions about your son, for the reason that he is irrevocably mixed up with this case, even if he has been living at the north pole ever since you saw him last, and does not know at this moment whether the house is standing or is in ruins."

"I don't see how."

"The house was built for him. Through a circumstance, its destiny was changed. Since the time the house has had, to say the least, rather an unusual history. It has appeared to be haunted. People have rented the house to live in it, and they have gone away, or have been driven away—and each time they have gone without giving you any explanation. I must know all about the history of your son before he left you and since he has gone, as near as you can tell it to me."

The old man sighed; but he murmured an assent.

"Where is your son now?" asked the detective again.

"I don't know. The last that I knew anything about him, he was in Paris. He is there now for all that I know to the contrary."

"When did you hear about him last?"

"Six months ago."

"Were you in communication with him?"

"No; never that again."

"How did you happen to hear about him?"

"One of his old associates—a member of my church—met him on the street in Paris. He mentioned the fact to me."

"And nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

"Did you ask no questions about your son?"

"No; I turned and walked away from the man who told me about him."

"What is the name of that person?"

"Claude Bagley."

"Where does he live?"

"Around the corner from us. I can show you the house when we pass it, as we will have to do."

"Do you know if your son has ever been in the city since you parted with him five years ago?"

"I am reasonably certain that he *has* been here, although I do not know positively. It would be easily ascertained, however."

"I wish you would find out for me if he has been here, and if so, when; and how long a time he remained. And now, Mr. Jones, if you will be so good, and if you will pardon me for putting you to the pain of it, I wish you to tell me from beginning to end, the history of the trouble which brought about the separation between you."

"Look here, Carter, I don't know what the dev——"

"It will be easier for you, Mr. Jones, if you understand at once that it is entirely for your son's good and for your own that I ask these questions about him. I wish to know all there is to know about the history of that house—and the history of your son is necessarily a part of it."

CHAPTER III.

KILLING A MAN BY INCHES.

The old gentleman hesitated a long time before he made any reply whatever to the request of the detective; but at last, heaving a sigh of resignation, he said:

"I will tell you the gist of the matter in as few words as possible. What I tell you will be sufficient to give you an outline of the story. If, after that, there are any particulars about any part of the story that you wish to learn, you will have to elicit your information by asking questions."

"Very good," replied Nick. "That will do capitally."

"Thirty-five years ago, Mr. Carter, I quarreled with a young man who had been my companion and chum since babyhood. We were both headstrong, passionate young men, and, therefore, the result of that quarrel was a bitter enmity between us.

"The breach was never healed. We comported ourselves, under all circumstances, as if we were utter strangers. We both went into business down-town. We were both successful. Both of us became rich. If the

exigencies of business affairs brought us in contact, we exchanged merely the barest civilities. We never saw or spoke to each other save in the presence of third parties, when the uses of common courtesy demanded that we should do so.

"Our homes are not far apart. Until the upper section of the city was built up as it is to-day, we were really neighbors, but the encroachments of improvements in that part of the city has fortunately divided us.

"Sam Baxter—you may as well know to whom I refer, at once—has an only daughter; an only child, in fact. In my own family, there was a son and two daughters. The irony of fate decreed that my son and his daughter should meet and should fall in love with each other.

"I knew nothing of the affair—nor did Sam Baxter, I believe—until matters had developed to the extent where the two wished to marry. Those fool children believed that they had been especially selected by Providence to heal the breach that had existed so many years between their fathers.

"Well, Baxter and I felt exactly the same about it. I forbade the thing and so did he. I threatened to disown my son and he made the same threat to his daughter, unless the affair was called off at once and for all time.

"The two simply laughed at us, and defied us. They slipped away one afternoon, went together to the Church of the Transfiguration, and were quietly married. That same day they sailed for Europe, after having notified us —Baxter and me, I mean—by letters sent by messengers, of what had happened.

"I promptly sent a letter to Jere, to the London address he had given me, that everything was off; that he need not return; that he had made his own bed and he could lie upon it. I am assured that Baxter did the same, as far as his daughter was concerned."

"And is *that* all the trouble?" exclaimed the detective. "I thought——"

"I wish to Heaven it were all the trouble. No; you haven't heard it yet. There is no doubt at all but that after a little I would have sent for Jere to come back, and the thing would have arranged itself; but that was not to be.

"He made no reply whatever to the letter I sent to him in London, and I did not see or hear from him again until one night, in the middle of the night, he suddenly appeared before me, in my bedroom, in my house.

"I was awakened out of my sleep by the consciousness that somebody other than myself was in my room, and I awoke to find him standing beside my bed.

"He was as cool as a cucumber, as cold as organized charity, and as sneering as the devil.

"'Dad,' he said—and I want you to know, Mr. Carter, that while he was doing the talking, he all the while held a revolver pointed at my head—'I suppose that from your standpoint I am at this moment committing a burglary, and that I am a thief of the worst kind. I could have gone away without disturbing you, and you would not have known that I had been in the country at all, and, therefore, might never have known who robbed you. But lest you should accuse an innocent man of the affair, I have come here to the house to tell you that I have taken five hundred thousand dollars in cash from the bank.'

"Well, he went on to say that he assumed that that much of my fortune belonged to him, and that he had decided to take it whether I thought the same or not.

"It appeared that he had been in New York for some time, and had been watching for this very opportunity.

"It came when I was paid that amount of money too late in the afternoon to place the money in the time-locked vault, and had deposited it in one of the ordinary safes for the night.

"My son reminded me that he still carried the keys to the bank, and to all the private doors and strong boxes, and so forth, with which he had been provided before he went away—and, also, that I had never changed the combinations on the safes.

"It had therefore been a very easy matter for him to walk into the bank and to help himself.

"After doing all that, he had gone to the house—to his old home—to procure a few articles from his room that he wanted, and to see one of his sisters.

"Now, Carter, that is the story, with just one thing more to add, and that is this:

"When Jere got through talking, he tied me to the bed, so that I couldn't escape—and didn't, until I was released, two hours later. He also tied a handkerchief over my mouth so that I couldn't call out, and after that he went through the house.

"Instead of waking his sister—the one he professed that he wished to see—he helped himself to all the jewels and valuables that he could find, belonging to his sisters and his mother, and went away with them.

"In other words, instead of merely taking the cash from the bank—which I could have forgiven after a time—and coming to me to tell me about it, he had done the regular burglar work, both at the bank and at the house, and he got away with about six hundred thousand dollars' worth of stuff altogether.

"Now, there is the story. If you want any particulars, you will have to ask for them. I will answer any questions you care to ask, but do me the favor to ask them now, and have the thing done and over with forever. I don't want to refer to it again."

"How long was it after his marriage that this happened?" asked the detective.

"Just about a year."

"You are positive that the man who awakened you, and who robbed you, was your son?"

"There is no doubt of that."

"What was his manner toward you?"

"Just one continued sneer, from start to finish."

"How long did he remain in your room?"

"Fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Did he say how long he had been in New York?"

"No."

"Or when he intended to go away again?"

"No."

"Or where he thought of going?"

"No; he gave me no information whatever."

"Did he refer to his wife?"

"Not once."

"Did he waken his mother, or either of his sisters?"

"No; he managed somehow not to do that."

"You say he bound you and gagged you; who was it that released you?"

"My valet."

"Did the valet discover you in your predicament, or did you manage to attract his attention?"

"I summoned him. After a great deal of exertion I managed to reach a button in the wall which connects with a bell in his room. By that means I called him."

"Have you had any communication with Mr. Baxter about the affair of the marriage of your children, and what happened after it?"

"I have never had any communication with him whatever, on any subject."

"So you do not know if he saw or heard from his daughter at or near the time when you were robbed, eh?"

"No; I do not."

"I think I remember that there was something in the papers about the affair at the time."

"Yes; and what did appear, I caused to be inserted. I sent to the editors of several of the papers, and asked them to send interviewers to me. To the reporters, I told the entire story, just as it was. I told them that my son had returned in the dead of night, and had robbed me, and I offered a reward of five thousand dollars to the man who would arrest him, anywhere on American soil. I said that I didn't want him extradited; I merely wanted him to stay out of the country."

"What action did Mr. Baxter take?"

"I have never heard that he took any at all."

"Do you know if he was robbed of anything, at that time? Or——"

"Carter, I don't know anything whatever about him, and I don't want to; and now, if you can get anything out of what I have told you about my son, which is connected with the subsequent history of that house, I would like to know it."

The detective smiled, waited a moment, and then he said:

"Let us return to the house for a moment."

"With all my heart."

"You had it built for your son?"

"I have already told you of that, several times."

"Built to completeness; completely furnished; supplied with everything necessary to the beginning of an establishment, even to silver, and ornaments, and all that."

"Yes."

"Now why did you do all that, at that particular time? Was your son contemplating marriage with another young woman, at the time?"

"Certainly he was."

"Ah! That is a chapter that I have not heard. Who was she?"

"Selina Morton; the daughter of another old friend who died soon after she was born. It was a match that I particularly desired."

"Were they engaged to be married?"

"Yes."

"And your son jilted her?"

"I think that is the word usually applied to a matter of the kind."

"What has become of Miss Morton?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"Do you mean that you have lost all trace of her since that time?"

"I mean that I never had any particular trace of her. I never saw her but twice in my life, and then only for a few moments each time. Jere met her when he was away from home. He told me about it; told me who she was, and that he was going to marry her. I approved because she was the daughter of an old friend. I had already begun to build the house for him, and so I told him to go ahead and arrange for his marriage, and that I would make them a present of a home that should be absolutely complete; and now, look here, Carter!"

"Well?"

"Time is flying along. There are two murdered bodies that I know about, up there in that house—and there may be several more. Don't you think that we ought to go there without any more delay?"

"Yes; we will go at once."

"I want to get the thing off my hands. There will be enough unpleasantness about it as it is. Can you go up there to the house without me?"

"No; you will have to go along. Come. I am ready."

"There is one thing more that I want you to understand, Carter, and that is that you are to have absolute authority in this matter. If you want to take the house apart, stone by stone, in order to unravel this mystery, you may do so. I don't take any stock in ghosts, but there is some uncanny reason why not one of those tenants could live in the house, and I want you to find out what it is. You see, whatever the reason is, it is probably also an explanation of the present mystery. I suppose I

have appeared quite calm in telling you about it all, but all the same, Carter, the thing is killing me—killing me by inches."

CHAPTER IV.

MURDERED BEFORE NICK CARTER'S EYES.

When Nick Carter, accompanied by Jeremy Jones, senior, approached No. 33 Bulfinch Terrace, and paused at the bottom of the wide sweep of circular steps which led to the front entrance, the detective said to his companion:

"Mr. Jones, I would like you to remain outside while I go through the house, alone. You can sit on the steps and smoke a cigar, while you wait for me, and if anybody approaches, you can protect me from interruption."

"All the same, Carter, I think I would prefer to go through the house with you."

"And all the same, I prefer that you should not do so."

"Why?"

"For the very simple reason that I wish to be alone. Is the door unlocked?"

"Yes. I entered this morning with an extra key that I have always kept in my possession. Here it is. The door is on the latch. The key will open it."

"Did you find it that way this morning?"

"Yes."

Nick accepted the key, and leaving the old gentleman where he was, he mounted the steps, and a moment later had passed through the door and closed it behind him.

He entered very quietly, making scarcely a sound; and when he had stepped through into the wide hall, upon the soft and yielding rug which gave forth no sound of his footfall, he closed the door as gently and as noiselessly as one feather might have been touched against another.

Instantly, however, he was aware of a very important fact, which was, that he was not alone in the house.

With the very act of closing the door, he heard a noise of some kind, which came down to him along the winding stairs from the second floor.

It was as if a door had been suddenly and rapidly closed; not exactly a banging of the door, but nevertheless there was the unmistakable noise and jar which is the inevitable accompaniment of such an act.

One who was less accustomed to analyzing things instantly, might have supposed that the door that had made the noise, had been closed by a circulation of air—that is, a sudden draft which he had himself caused by the opening and closing of the front door; but the detective knew better than that at once.

When a door is blown shut by the wind, there is about the sound a certain absence of all restraint, which is never there when the act is done, however forcibly, by hand.

Nick had intended to proceed by slow degrees, and to examine every nook and corner of the interior of the house, as he proceeded; but this sudden noise from the upper floor startled him, and at once he leaped forward, taking the stairs at leaps and bounds, so that three seconds of time could not have elapsed before he was on the landing at the top of the stairs.

He had arrived there, too, without making a sound that could have been heard ten feet away from him; and now he paused again, and listened.

The house was utterly silent.

If there had been others there when the detective entered, they had been somehow warned of his presence, and had fled, or had hidden.

Nick regretted now that he had not been more explicit in determining from Jones the exact location of the room in which he had discovered the bodies, for he would have gone directly to it; however, he dismissed the thought with a shrug of his shoulders, and turned his attention toward the apartment which he considered as the most likely place.

We must remember that he was inside a mansion; not an ordinary house.

The place was huge, as we reckon dwelling-houses. It was massive.

The hall in which he stood, at the top of the stairs, was approximately in the center of the building, was circular in form, and from it doors opened into the several rooms of that floor, or story.

Above him was a gallery, guarded by a wrought-iron rail, decorated with bronze, and from there, again, he could see from where he stood, other doors connected with the rooms of the third story.

He was, in fact, standing under a dome around which the structure had been erected.

It is not difficult, upon entering any house, to pick out at once the rooms which one supposes the members of the family would select for constant use, and as Nick opened one of the doors and passed into a room, he was at once convinced that he had hit upon the very apartment which had been chosen by the young couple as their sleeping room.

It was a very large room, superbly decorated, and there were three connecting rooms, so that the whole comprised a suite.

The evidences of recent occupancy were all about him.

There was a huge dresser over between two of the windows, and its top was littered with articles of feminine use.

There were twin beds in the room, and these had not been made up since they were last in use. A pair of bed shoes, trimmed with eiderdown, were on the floor near

one of these beds; a corset hung over the back of one of the chairs; a skirt, which might have been part of an ordinary street costume, was laid across the arm of the same chair.

Other articles of feminine wearing apparel were here and there about the room, in exactly the places where they might have been dropped by a young woman who was not particularly orderly—or who had all her life been accustomed to being waited upon when disrobing, and had on this particular occasion, dispensed with it.

The only article of masculine attire in that room consisted of a pair of slippers which were on the floor near the other bed—and these two beds were placed so near together that there was not room for a person to pass between them.

The whole place seemed to be sufficiently orderly. There were evidences of carelessness about, to be sure; but there was no sign of such disorder as would have been the result of a struggle, or of a crime—and there was no sign of a crime anywhere at all.

All this that has been described, the detective discovered almost with a glance of his eyes, for even in that instant during which he had paused in the rotunda under the dome, he had determined to make a complete tour of the house at once, and then to return and go over it again, systematically.

So now, he only passed through this room which has already been partly described, noticing what has been mentioned, as he passed.

In the adjoining room were the evidences of masculine uses.

It was evident that the man was more careful than his wife in the care of his clothing.

A pair of trousers, neatly folded, were on a plush couch at one side of the room. Near them were his shoes and hose. His coat had been hung over the back of one chair, and his waistcoat over another; the collar, tie, and cuffs were on the bureau. Two cigarette stubs and a freshly opened box of cigarettes were on a tray on a small table beside an easy chair, and there were a few droppings of ashes on the floor near the chair, showing that somebody had smoked while there.

But again there was no sign of a struggle or of a crime anywhere, and Nick began to wonder if the old gentleman had found the bodies down-stairs, instead of in the sleeping rooms, as he had somehow understood to be the case.

He passed to the next room.

This was a sort of private living-room; a cozy little apartment, with book shelves on every side of it, with a library table in the center of it, with comfortable chairs everywhere at hand, with a couch here and a reclining chair there, with engravings on the walls, with a wealth of decoration and innovations for the sake of comfort, which rendered it at once a charming place.

Here, everything seemed to be in order—that is, such order as prevails—or, happily, does not prevail—in a room that is lived in constantly.

There was an embroidery hoop over near one of the windows, on the floor beside a chair; a design was half worked upon the cloth that was stretched upon it; the needle was still under one of the loops of silk, as if the woman who had been using it had been called from her occupation while she was in the very act of taking a stitch.

Everything here was peaceful and quiet.

There remained only a bathroom of that suite; and a glance told the detective that there was nothing there to interest him.

He passed out again under the dome, and across it into another suite.

In arrangement, this was like the first, save only that it bore no evidences of occupancy, other than that it was ready for use at any moment.

But there was not the atmosphere about it which evidenced constant and uninterrupted use.

In a word, it had not been lived in.

A third suite, and a fourth one, were the same. Several individual rooms on that floor supplied no further information.

The rooms of the third story were counterparts of those under them, and it required only a few moments for the detective to make tour of them, and to discover—nothing.

"Plainly," he mused to himself, "I must descend to the main floor for a sight of the bodies discovered by Jones. I would have searched there first had it not been for the sound of that closing door I heard when I entered the house."

And here be it said that he had nowhere discovered the slightest trace of the presence of any other person than himself in the mansion.

The servants' quarters he already knew to be in an extension, which could be approached only from the ground floor and at the rear of the house.

Hastening back to the main floor, he lost no time in making his way rapidly from room to room in that part of the house.

There was the great drawing-room, the library, the dining-room, a smoking-room, a breakfast room, a small reception room, and several smaller apartments which he passed rapidly through—and always without result.

He was beginning to be amazed and somewhat skeptical concerning the story he had been told by the eccentric old gentleman.

He wondered if he were the victim of a hoax, or if he had to do with a madman, who had been crazed by his misfortunes.

It was certain that thus far he had discovered no evidence whatever that a crime had been committed in that

house—and now he had searched every part of it save only the servants' quarters.

It did not take him long to complete that part of the task; and at last he stood at the front door with his hand on the bronze knob, prepared to go out again and to confront the old man with the facts of his search.

He had turned the knob of the door; he had pulled it open perhaps an inch, when again, from somewhere in the upper part of the house, he heard that sound of the sudden closing of a door.

Instantly he released his hold.

He believed that this time he had located the sound accurately, and with one bound he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, and started up them on a run.

As he advanced, he heard other sounds. Other doors in the distance—and located where he could not see them—banged shut; a peal of wild laughter rang out from one of the rooms, which, when he entered it, was utterly deserted; the clatter of running footfalls sounded on the hardwood floors where the rugs did not entirely cover them.

But always, when he arrived at the spot from whence the sounds had proceeded, he found absolutely nothing to determine what had caused them.

And then, as he paused for an instant in the room he had entered first, after his entrance to the building, he was startled by a loud cry from the lower hall.

This was followed by the sound of a heavy fall and a gurgling moan; and then, as the detective almost flung himself down the stairs toward the main floor, he saw that the front door, which he had partly opened, was now wide ajar, and that across the threshold, lying on his back and with his arms flung out at right angles, was stretched the lifeless body of Jeremy Jones, Sr.

As Nick Carter bounded to his side and bent over him, the old man shuddered and groaned. A convulsive spasm shot through him. He opened his eyes for an instant, and with untold horror in them tried to speak.

But his jaw dropped in its sockets, and remained so. The light in his eyes went out.

The old man was dead.

CHAPTER V.

SURROUNDED BY MYSTERIOUS DEEDS.

Have you ever seen the corpse of a man who has been choked to death? If so, you will understand without the necessity of description the appearance of the old gentleman as he lay there across the threshold of the house he had built for his son.

His eyes were bulging and staring, for with the dropping of his jaw they had flown open again. His brows were corrugated, as if with intense suffering. His hands were clenched, his knees were drawn up, and altogether he represented death in about its most repulsive form.

The collar had been half torn away from his neck, and around his throat were two deep, red lines, of the size of your little finger.

There were two or three places where the thing that had made these lines had cut into the flesh, or at least had broken the skin, showing the terrible pressure that had been put upon them when the old man was choked.

And, indeed, when the detective stopped to analyze the incident, he was appalled by the evidence of despatch that the murderer had left behind him.

As nearly as Nick could figure out the time, two full minutes could not more than have elapsed from the time he turned away from the door to hasten up the stairs in search of the person who made the noise there, and the cry from the lips of Jeremy Jones, which announced that he was attacked.

Then again, from whence had the murderer appeared, and whither had he gone? Had the attack originated outside the door, or had the old man entered the house of his own accord before the assault was made upon him?

The one apparent fact was that the old man had been foully murdered, and that almost with the eyes of the detective upon him.

For once—and perhaps for the first time in all his career—the detective felt himself helpless.

There were a hundred—aye, a thousand—questions which the detective had intended to propound to the old man—and now, alas, he was beyond the power to reply to them.

Had the person or persons who were making this mansion a sort of headquarters for crime realized all this? Had they deemed it expedient that the old man should be put out of the way at any cost, rather than be permitted to live and tell all he knew to the detective?

Did they consider it wiser to take the chances of killing him, almost under the nose of Nick Carter, than to let him live and reveal what he knew?

It would seem so.

It was not often that Nick Carter gave way to shock.

Rarely in his life had he been confronted with a circumstance which momentarily had deprived him of that power of clear and concise reasoning and deduction which was his, and of which he was justly proud.

But at this present moment he felt knocked out utterly.

He rose from his position beside the corpse of the old man, and his first move then was to step outside the door, and to look up and down the street, in order to ascertain if other persons than himself had been attracted by the old man's cry, or had noticed anything unusual about the aspect of the house.

There was nobody in sight, and he returned to the interior of the mansion and closed the door.

One might have supposed that the idea would have occurred to him that he might be attacked himself, after

the same manner as the old gentleman—but he never thought of that.

We will do him justice, too, and assert that if the thought had occurred to him, he would have welcomed the possibility of such a thing with all his heart.

Nothing would have pleased him better at that moment than that the murderer of the old man would step out from some place of concealment and attack him as he had attacked Jones.

Having closed the door, the detective stood silently beside the corpse, gazing down upon it—wondering.

"What mystery is here?" he asked himself. "Let me get the thing clearly in my understanding before I make another move. This old man comes to me this morning and informs me that he has discovered the bodies of two murdered people in this house—a man and a woman.

"I follow his lead—I come here. There is nothing to be found.

"There are no dead bodies in the house, and nowhere is there a sign of a struggle which might have ended in a murder.

"At the very moment when I am about to return to the old man to ask him more particularly about his statement—at the very moment when I am on the verge of doubting his sanity, and am ready to believe almost that a hoax has been played upon me—there is a wild cry of agony from the very man I doubt, and, although I lose not an instant in getting to him, I find him at his last gasp when I arrive, and the murderer nowhere to be seen.

"Throughout the house while I search it I hear noises which I cannot explain; and even as the old man is breathing his last gasp I hear footfalls, running feet, and laughter from different parts of the house.

"And all this in the broad light of day. All this between nine and ten o'clock in the morning. All this in a modern house that has been built only five years; in a house that is equipped from top to bottom with electric lights, burglar-alarms, and telephone—*ah!*"

Even as the word telephone formed itself in his mind—and it occurred to him because at that moment his eyes rested upon the transmitter, which could be seen through an open door upon the library table—the alarm-bell connected with it rang out a sharp and imperative summons.

With one hasty glance toward the corpse on the floor, Nick passed into the library and, picking up the instrument in his hand, placed the receiver against his ear.

"Hello!" he said; and then—we won't say that he almost dropped the receiver in the surprise that followed, but he was certainly startled—a voice which he did not recognize came to him over the wire.

"Is that you, Nick Carter?" inquired the voice.

To say that the detective was astonished would be to express the idea altogether too mildly; but so many surprises had followed, one upon another, that he was now thoroughly on the alert.

He contented himself by not replying at all, but by holding the receiver at his ear very tightly nevertheless, in the hope that he would hear more.

And he did hear more—but not through the receiver of the telephone.

It came in the shape of a scraping sound from behind him, as if something were being dragged across a floor.

Instantly he dropped the receiver, and sprang toward the door which communicated with the hall.

As he reached it, the door directly opposite him was banged shut. He both saw and heard it; but that was not the surprising thing in itself, for in that same instant he saw that the body of the murdered man had been moved several feet from where he had left it.

Instantly it was evident to the detective that the criminals, who seemed to infest the house like rats, were determined that there should remain no corpus delicti by which their crimes might be brought home to them, and that now they had made a masterly effort to steal away the body of their latest victim even as they had previously stolen the others.

And then, too, the detective remembered the call to the telephone, and the strange and, until then, inexplicable circumstance that anybody should have known that he was there in that house at the time.

But he thoroughly understood that circumstance now.

It was merely that the house was equipped with more than one telephone, and that they were on the same wire.

The bell of this instrument in the library had been rung from the other instrument in the same house, and that explained how the person at the other end had called Nick Carter by name; and the call had been made simply to attract his attention away from the body of the murdered man while they were stealing it away.

Had he replied to that question—had he permitted his curiosity to get the better of his judgment—this corpse would now have disappeared even as the others had done, and he would have had no means at hand for explaining the mystery.

It may seem rather remarkable that a man could smile broadly under such circumstances, but it is true that the detective did so at that moment.

There was an intensely amusing side to the incidents in that house, as they occurred to him at that moment.

There he was, alone with the corpse of the murdered man. The law said that he could not move it—that it was better that he should not touch it at all until it had been viewed by the coroner; but already it had been moved, and if he elected to keep it where the coroner could see it at all, it behooved him to move it at once.

He could not pick it up in his arms and take it away from the house with him; that sort of proceeding would not do at all. He could not leave it long enough to go for aid, for it would undoubtedly be stolen away from him while he was absent.

Plainly there was only one thing that could be done, and that was for him to take the body into the library with him while he used the telephone to call for assistance.

He did that very thing without further hesitation.

He picked the body up in his arms and carried it into the library, depositing it on one of the big chairs, in plain view, while he again applied himself to the telephone.

He rang up the central office, and presently received the stereotyped reply, "What number, please?"

"Police headquarters, as quickly as possible, if you please," he said; and after a very short wait his call was answered.

"Hello!" he said again. "Police headquarters?"

"Yes."

"This is Nick Carter. I am at thirty-three Bul——"

He stopped, for the line had gone "dead" in the very midst of his speech.

"Hello!" he called again; there was no reply.

"Hello! hello! hello!" he called, time after time, but always with the same result, and he knew that somebody had tampered with the wire in some part of the house, and that he was effectually cut off from communication with the outside world by that means.

"They are a pretty slick lot of articles, whoever they are," mused the detective grimly. "Here I am, practically a prisoner in this house, with the corpse of a murdered man, which I dare not leave for a moment alone, lest it be stolen from me. I'll wager that never was a man placed in a position like this one before. I cannot cart the thing around with me. It isn't a handy thing to carry, and it isn't pleasant company either. I cannot use the telephone. I cannot leave the corpse long enough to seek assistance——"

He stopped suddenly.

Then, deliberately, he raised the body in his arms and strode with it toward the front door.

This he opened and passed through, closing it behind him, for he still had the key to it in his pocket.

Outside he deposited the corpse on the steps under the porte cochère, and then, making a hollow of his hands, he shouted a loud hello across the street to a man whom he espied near the doors of the stable that belonged to the other house.

The man raised his head, and Nick signaled and called to him again; and in a moment more he was gratified to see that the man was running toward him with all speed.

The detective watched him as he advanced. He saw the man reach the gate and pass into the street. He started across it, and Nick shouted to him to hasten.

The coachman came on at full speed. He had reached the middle of the street, and was in the act of calling out to the detective when Nick saw him halt and reel, as if he had been hit by a bullet; and then he crashed to the ground, flat upon his face, without a sound or a cry.

And there had been no other sound either.

There was no report of a pistol, no sound to tell what sort of missile had been hurled or shot at the man.

He had simply collapsed upon the asphalt pavement, without sound or warning.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROBLEM OF THREE DEATHS.

The detective leaped into the street the instant this occurred.

He was at the side of the fallen man almost as soon as he was well upon the ground, and he picked him up in his arms and ran back with him again toward the house he had left.

But even as he started up the circular-shaped steps, balustraded by granite walls as they were, he heard a peal of laughter from the veranda, the front door slammed shut with a noise that might have been heard far down the street, and when he got there with his second burden, the spot where he had deposited the body of Jeremy Jones was vacant. The corpse was gone.

It can readily be imagined that the detective was rather dazed by the rapidity of recurring events, for which there seemed to be no logical explanation; but instantly he made up his mind to one thing, and that was that there was no use in his attempting to combat, single-handed, the ingenuity of the people who infested that house like vermin.

He even made no effort to enter the house just then, but he placed his burden on the stone flooring of the veranda, and at once began an examination to determine what had happened to him.

Almost directly over the coachman's temple he discovered a round, blue bruise, which was rapidly swelling—and as quickly he realized that the man was only stunned, and that he would soon open his eyes to entire consciousness.

Nevertheless, it was five minutes later before he was able to talk, and then he looked up into the eyes of the detective with an expression of wonder and alarm.

"What has happened?" he asked; and the detective saw at once that he had an intelligent man to deal with; one who was above his position in many ways.

"It is a little bit difficult to tell exactly what has happened," replied the detective. "The certainty is that you ran against something out there in the middle of the street, and that, whatever it was, it downed you on the spot."

"Something hit me," said the coachman. "I remember now. Somebody at a window on the second floor shot something at me. I remember. I saw him when he did it, although it was for just the briefest part of an instant."

"You saw him?" asked the detective.

"Yes. I saw a shadow of a man. That is all. He held something in his hand, and——"

"Wait. Let's go inside the house. I don't wish to attract attention here just yet. Do you suppose that you have the courage to enter that house, my man?"

"I never saw the house, or the man either, that I was afraid of, sir," the coachman smiled back at him.

"Good. That's all right. Won't you tell me your name?"

"James Rawson, sir."

"All right. Thank you. Can you walk now?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective used his key again and entered the house, followed by the coachman; and he led the man directly toward the library, as being the most available room where they could talk together.

As they moved forward, the detective peered on every side of him in the vain hope that he would discover some trace of the missing body of Jeremy Jones; but there was not a sign of it to be seen anywhere, and so he decided to make no mention of it at the time.

"James," he said, as soon as they were seated, and he had given the coachman a swallow of brandy from his little flask, "I don't suppose you have the least idea who I am?"

"Not unless you are the detective, sir. Mr. Jones went after a detective this morning. He said his name would be Carter; Nick Carter, I think he said."

"That is correct. I am Nick Carter, and your master did ask me to come here. Now, tell me what else he said to you about it?"

"He said that I was to place myself under your orders when you arrived, and that I was to reply to all your questions without reservation, sir."

"Exactly; and that is precisely what I wish you to do."

"Yes, sir. I will do it to the best of my ability."

"Did your master tell you that he would or that he would not return here with me?"

"He told me that he thought he would not do so. That is why he asked me to represent him to you as fully as possible."

"Did you know that I was here before you heard me call to you?"

"No, sir."

"You did not see anybody at all enter this house since your master went away this morning?"

"No, sir."

"Then we will leave that part of the subject for the present, for I wish to get at what you know—and *all* you know about this case—in a consecutive manner."

"Yes, sir."

"Did you know by sight the people who have been living in this house?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Gardner? Yes, sir."

"When did you see either of them the last time?"

"Not in several days, sir. I don't remember exactly when it was, but I remember that I did see them leave the house together one morning not long ago and walk toward the avenue together."

"Do you know where either of them went?"

"I do not."

"And you have not seen either of them since?"

"No."

"Do you know if any other person saw them or either of them return to this house?"

"No, sir."

"And I suppose you thought no more about them until this morning, did you?"

"Yes, sir. I did think it strange that I had not seen either of them, for, until I missed them altogether, I had seen them every day, and sometimes two or three times a day."

"Where had you seen them?"

"On the front steps, or walking on the street together."

"You came over here to this house with your master this morning, did you not?"

"I did."

"Who suggested that either of you should come here? You, or Mr. Jones?"

"Mr. Jones."

"And he asked you to come with him?"

"Yes, sir; and told me to call the gardener. I did so, but when he arrived at the door Mr. Jones sent the gardener back to his duties, and we entered the house without him."

"Very good. Now tell me what you discovered when you came into the house."

"Has not Mr. Jones told you all about it, sir?"

"Yes. He told me a great deal about it. But I want a calm and clear statement from you. You seem to be unusually self-possessed, and not easily frightened."

"Well, sir, when we rang and rang at the bell and received no reply, Mr. Jones used his key and entered the house. As we stepped inside, he raised his voice and called aloud. Receiving no reply, he directed me to do the same, and I called with all the power of my lungs."

"You got no reply, I suppose?"

"None whatever, sir."

"Nor heard any noise at all?"

"Not a sound, sir."

"What did you do then?"

"Mr. Jones looked at me and I looked at him. We did not either of us know just what it was best to do under the circumstances, and I think it was I who suggested that we had better search the house.

"Mr. Jones asked where we should begin, and I suggested that the most likely place in which to find them would be their sleeping room."

"Exactly."

"We went there at once--and we found, as he has no doubt told you, their bodies."

"Their dead bodies!"

"Certainly, sir."

"They had been murdered, you think?"

"There is no doubt of it."

"Why not? How had they been killed?"

"Choked or strangled; it is the same thing."

"What makes you think that they had been strangled?"

"The fact that there were marks of fingers, or of a rope—I could not tell which—upon their throats."

"Both of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long, in your opinion, had they been dead?"

"That is impossible for me to determine, sir, but I should say at least two days."

"Why do you think that?"

"From the appearance of the bodies, sir. Changes had begun to take place. There was an odor in the room. Not much, to be sure, but it was there. But surely you have seen the bodies before this, and have been able to determine for yourself."

"Never mind that part of it now. Tell me, rather, the condition of the room—and describe more definitely the appearance of the bodies."

"The bodies were on the floor, if that is what you mean. They were attired only in their night-clothing; the man wore pajamas, I remember."

"And the room— "

"Why, the room appeared like any other sleeping room that has been occupied during the night."

"I mean was there anywhere the appearance that a struggle had taken place?"

"No, sir; if there was, I did not notice it."

"Did you touch, or move, or rearrange anything about the room? Or did you touch the bodies? Or did either of you do any of these things?"

"No, sir. We only stood and looked at them. I thought my master would faint away, and I put my arms around him and sustained him until he partly recovered. Then he directed me to touch nothing. We came away then, and left the house together. Outside he told me that I was to say absolutely nothing to anybody of what I had seen, that I was to keep away from the house, that he would go after you, and that when you came I was to reply to all your questions—and all that sort of thing, sir."

"Yes, I understand. James, how long have you been in the employ of Mr. Jones?"

"Fifteen years, sir. I was twenty when he engaged me, and I have served him ever since."

"You have never left him even for a time?"

"No, sir; not even for a day. I have never taken a vacation even, save when I went away with him. He always took me on his trips to the woods, of which he was very fond. He said that I served him on such occasions better than his valet."

"Your master had entire confidence in you, did he not, James?"

"I think so, sir."

"And you have been very fond of him?"

"I love him as if he were my own flesh and blood, sir."

The detective hesitated.

He felt that it would be almost cruel to break the news of the death of Mr. Jones too suddenly, and besides he was not quite prepared to do so as yet; so, after a moment of silent thought, he rose and said:

"Come with me to the room where you saw the bodies."

Then, without further words, he led the way out of the library and up the stairs to the room that has been described.

When he opened the door to enter, the detective purposely stepped back and pushed the coachman in ahead of him; but the instant the man crossed the threshold, he came to a halt and uttered a startled cry, while he turned a wild and haggard face toward Nick Carter.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT.

"You might have told me of this, sir; you might have prepared me for it," said the coachman reproachfully, and Nick saw that his eyes had filled with tears, and that he was striving with all his might to control himself.

With a quick motion the detective brushed the man aside and strode into the room, and then he also came to a sudden stop.

The room was no longer tenantless, for the dead body of Jeremy Jones, that had been snatched away from the front steps and carried into the house while the detective was running to the aid of the stricken coachman, was now lying at full length upon one of the twin beds.

As the coachman partly recovered himself, and would have rushed forward toward his dead master, the detective reached out and restrained him.

"Wait!" he said; and then, as quickly as possible, he described all that had happened in the house since the moment he came to it in company with its owner.

Rawson sobbed like a child as the detective told the story, finally describing the manner of the death of the old gentleman.

"It is a terrible thing, sir," he said, after a little. "I suppose the body will have to remain where it is now until after the coroner has seen it?"

"Yes; and in the meantime you must break the news to the family, and you must also do an errand for me."

"As for breaking the news, sir, there is no one at home to whom to break it. Mrs. Jones, with her two daughters, sailed for Europe yesterday. It will be five or six days more before they can know about this."

"Perhaps it is better so. Come away now. We will leave the body here——"

"But where are the other bodies, sir?"

"Where, indeed? I have already told you how they were not here when I entered the room, leaving the old man outside the house."

"Would to God that he had remained there."

"Amen to that, James. But come back to the library now. I will try the telephone again, and if it does not work this time——"

"There is a telephone on this floor, sir."

"Is there?" said Nick. "I did not discover it when I searched the house."

"That is because your search was necessarily confined to what you could see in passing through a room. Look here, sir."

Rawson stepped to a flat-top desk of the pattern that is ordinarily used for a disappearing typewriter, opened it, and revealed a fully equipped telephone.

But a glance at it was sufficient to reveal the fact that the instrument had been utterly wrecked. The wires which connected it with the batteries had been torn out, and in this manner the total connection with the house had been destroyed. It was by this means that the mysterious persons in the house had thrown the library telephone out of commission when the detective was attempting to make use of it to call up police headquarters.

"Go to the nearest telephone," said the detective then, "and call up the police. Tell the man who answers you, no matter who he may be, that I am here in this house, that at least three murders have been committed here, and that I want assistance sent to the house at once.

"As soon as you have accomplished that——"

He paused, for just at that instant they both heard the loud ringing of the bell that was connected with the front door, and hastening down the stairs Nick was both surprised and pleased to find himself confronted by Inspector O'Brien and two police officers. An automobile standing at the curb told how they had got there.

"Something happened to the telephone you were using when you called up the central office," said the inspector. "But the sergeant got enough to know that it was Nick Carter who called, and that you were at Thirty-three Bul—something. We found it, and here we are. Now, what has happened and who is this man?"

"Three murders have happened—and possibly several more. I will confess that I do not know very much about it yet. This man is a servant of one of the murdered men, and is the only person who can supply us with any information at all, and he doesn't know any more about it than I do—or than you do, for the matter of that. Come in here, inspector, while I tell you the story."

They entered the library together, leaving the others outside the hall under the dome; and there Nick related in detail the entire history of events connected with the house, as he knew them.

The inspector listened to the end without interruption. At the conclusion he said:

"I have heard of ghosts at midnight, and around churchyards, Nick, but I'll swear that this is the first and only time that I have ever known them to inhabit a new house, and to take the middle of the forenoon for their manifestations."

Nick smiled somewhat lamely, and replied:

"I will have to confess, Steve, that I have never been up against it quite so hard as I was for a little while this morning. I had to bring the body of poor old Jeremy Jones into this room while I attempted to use the telephone, in order that it would not be stolen away from under my nose."

"And then, by Jove! they got away with it, after all; eh?"

"Yes; only they didn't take it very far away."

"To the same room where the other bodies were supposed to have been, eh?"

"Yes."

"It is there now, I suppose?"

"It was ten minutes ago. I think that, inasmuch as it was left there, they have not taken it away again."

"One thing goes almost without saying, doesn't it, Nick?"

"What is that?"

"Why, that this house must be a perfect network of secret passages?"

"Sure; and the bad part of that is that the only man who could have told us about them is dead."

"Sure; that is the very reason why he was killed."

"But it is likely that the coachman knows something about them, although it is strange that he has not mentioned the fact, if he does. He has been in Jones' employ fifteen years."

"And he seems to be a bright sort of chap?"

"He does that."

"And an honest and sincere one at that."

"I think so."

"Let's have him in here."

Rawson was called, and the others were told to wait where they were.

"James," said the detective, as soon as he stood before them, "you were here, of course, during the time that this house was being built, eh?"

"Most of the time—yes, sir. Not all of it."

"How much of that time were you away?"

"Perhaps two or three months in all, sir."

"James, do you know about any secret passages that were built into this house, or did you ever hear your master say anything at all about such things in connection with this building?"

"Never, sir."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Jones told me that the house was built by days' labor; now who was it who supervised the work of building it?"

"The architect, sir, I suppose; although Mr. Jere—Mr. Jones, son, sir—was here a good deal of the time. I think that he and the architect were friends."

"And young Mr. Jones knew that the house was building for himself, did he not?"

"Certainly, sir. Everybody knew that."

"You never heard anything about secret passages, as connected with this house, from anybody at all?"

"No, sir."

"Do you suppose that if your master had known of the existence of such things, he would have told you about them?"

"I am very sure that he would have done so."

"It is very plain to the inspector and to me, James," continued the detective, after a pause, "that there are secret passages in this house; or, as he expresses it, that the place is honeycombed with them, or by them. Now, do you know if your master was fond of reading about such things? Or have you ever heard him talk about old castles or fortresses where there were secret chambers and stairways, and all that?"

"I never heard him mention such a subject in my life."

"How about the son?"

"Oh, he was always full of that sort of thing, sir. I remember that when he was quite a youngster, he read aloud a whole book to me, that was about such things. I think he named this house after that book, too, although the name has never been mentioned since—since Mr. Jere went away."

"What was that name, James?"

"Kenilworth, sir. That is what he called it."

The detective and the inspector exchanged glances.

"That would seem to be an indication, wouldn't it?" said the latter.

"Very decidedly so. However, we practically know that they are here. The thing is, first to find them, and next to discover who is making use of them."

"All the same," said the inspector, "I think it will be well for us to find out all that this man can tell us about that son."

"Yes," replied Nick. "I am coming to that. Don't you remember something about that son yourself, Steve?"

"Can't say that I do. What about him?"

"Don't you remember that long ago old Jeremy Jones sent for the reporters and told them a story about his son; told them that the young man had robbed him; had stolen a lot of money from the bank and a lot of jewelry from the house, and——"

"I never rightly believed that he did it, sir, if you will pardon me for interrupting you, sir," said Rawson, in a quiet but convincing voice. "In my own mind I am positive that he did not, and I am equally certain that it was not he at all who entered the father's room that night and left him there gagged and bound."

The detective turned to the coachman quickly.

"Why do you say that, and utter it so positively?" he demanded.

"Because it is my conviction, sir."

"Have you any reason other than prejudice upon which to base your assertion?"

"Yes, sir, I think I have."

"What—for example?"

"Well, sir, for one thing, I have the oath of Mr. Jere to the contrary; and when he made it to me I believed that he was telling me the truth. I believe so still."

"So," said Nick, "you have seen him since that time, have you?"

"I have seen him often since then, sir."

"How often?"

"Many times, sir. I could not say how often."

"Where have you seen him? Here in New York?"

"Certainly, sir. He is here in New York now. I saw him only——"

He paused, and Nick leaned forward eagerly.

"Only when?"

"By rights, sir," replied Rawson, "I ought not to tell you, for I promised faithfully that I would say nothing. It was a little more than a week ago that I saw him. It was the day before Mr. Gardner moved into this house. He and Mr. Gardner were friends, and I saw them together."

"He and Mr. Gardner were friends!" exclaimed Nick Carter; and then quietly he added:

"James, you should have told me that before. I think now that I will have to put you through my test of subconscious knowledge."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY OF A MIDNIGHT VISIT.

James Rawson looked at the detective inquiringly. The expression, "subconscious knowledge," was entirely meaningless to him.

"Answer my questions now, James, and reply to them carefully."

"Yes, sir."

"While you are replying to them, you must bear one thing in mind."

"What is that, if I may ask?"

"It is that by replying to me fearlessly and frankly, and by telling me in each case, the whole truth, and that without concealment of any kind, you will doubtless be doing a service to your young master. I perceive that you are fond of him."

"I was always very fond of him; always."

"Was he a good boy?"

"Always. He was never what you would call a bad boy. He was mischievous, like all boys, and he sometimes deserved—and received—thrashings from his father; but he was never what you would call a bad bay."

"You mean that he was never vicious, or malicious."

"Yes; that is what I mean."

"Do you remember about the disagreement between him and his father?"

"Perfectly."

"Did you know about it at the time?"

"All about it."

"From whom? The father or the son?"

"From both."

"And were their versions of the affair approximately the same?"

"I don't think that they differed materially, sir. The truth of the whole matter was this—if you will let me tell it to you as I understand it."

"That is precisely what I wish you to do."

"There was an old-time and a long-standing quarrel between Mr. Jones and a gentleman by the name of Baxter——"

"Yes; I know about that."

"The Baxters do not live far from here. There is a very beautiful daughter whose name is Pauline, and with her Mr. Jere fell in love."

"Well, I know about that also. Get ahead."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Jere was at that time engaged to marry a young woman who was the choice of his father—a Miss Selina Morton. She was a Californian, and Mr. Jere had gone out there in search of her, at the urgent request of his father."

"The old man didn't tell me that. He said that he scarcely knew the girl at all."

"That was the truth, sir. He did not know her at all. But he had known her father. The two men had been friends. Miss Morton's father amassed a great fortune and then died, leaving all his wealth to his daughter.

"Now, sir, all that I know about it is that the young man was heart-free at the time he heard the request of his father that he seek out Selina Morton, and make her his wife. He was told of the great wealth of the young lady, and when he saw her he found that she was attractive and beautiful, as well as very rich. So he asked her to be his wife and she accepted him.

"But he had not at that time seen Pauline Baxter; when he did, it was a case of love at first sight for both of them. He often told me about it, and until he had made up his mind to write to Miss Morton and tell her all about it, he was the most utterly miserable young man that you ever saw.

"He finally wrote to her and told her all about the affair. He read the letter to me before he sent it away; and the moment he had sent it, he sought out Miss Pauline and told her what he had done.

"The two consented to wait until they heard from Miss Morton before either of them told their fathers about their plans,—and, finally, the letter came from her, releasing young Jere.

"That closed the incident so far as she was concerned; but when old Mr. Jones heard of what had happened, and when he was told of the tentative engagement between his son and the daughter of the man he hated, he was almost wild.

"The result was the breach between them that you know about.

"Almost the only things I ever did against the orders of Mr. Jones, was to secretly aid that young couple in their meetings, and I frequently acted as coachman for them, and drove them about the park and to other places while they made their plans.

"Finally they were married secretly, and they went abroad.

"I should tell you right here, sir, that young Jere's mother knew all about it from the start, and that when the two were married, she secretly gave her son ten thousand dollars for the expenses of the honeymoon, fully believing—as we all did—that the father would forgive him before a month had passed.

"But he did not.

"The young couple returned to this country and remained for the most part of the time at a country place he had rented over on Long Island. He seldom came to the city, and when he did so, he took good care that he should not be seen. His father believed that he was all the time abroad.

"A strange feature of the case is that Mr. Baxter the girl's father—winked at the whole proceeding. I have always thought that he secretly approved of it. I do know that he supplied his daughter liberally with money, and I do know that Jere's mother also sent money to him, so that at no time were they without more than sufficient for their needs.

"Well, sir, the old gentleman was softening when that terrible thing about the burglary happened.

"That first morning after it, Mr. Jones bound everybody who was aware of the particulars to secrecy; but, as you know, he ultimately gave it to the papers."

"And where was young Jere at that time?" interrupted Nick.

"I am coming to that, sir."

"Very well. Go on."

"Jere had sent word to me the very day before that happened, that he wished to see me. He was at that time at the country place I have mentioned out on Long Island.

"I did not receive his message in time to keep the appointment he made, and that night—the very night of

the burglary—he came to the house to see me. He came to my room over the stable and awakened me."

"What time in the night was that?"

"It was comparatively early, sir. It could not have been later than eleven o'clock."

"Well?"

"He did not remain more than fifteen minutes——"

"What was it that he wished to see you about?"

"He wanted to hear from me what his father had been saying about him of late, for he had made up his mind to go to him at his office the following day and have an interview with him."

"But he wanted your advice before he did so, eh?"

"Yes, sir. That is what he said. I advised him to do so. I argued that he could not be any worse off than he was then, and that he might as well have it out at once, and be relieved from the anxiety.

"When he left me—and I have already told you that he remained only a short time—the very last thing that he said to me was:

"'I have a good notion to enter the house now, and to go directly to his room. I might as well see him there as anywhere, and I've got my key with me yet.'

"'Don't do it,' I said to him; and he shook his head and went away, leaving me in my room over the stable.

"I did not understand from his gesture whether he did intend to enter the house quietly and to talk with his father there. I got to thinking about it so deeply that I could not sleep, and at last, after a very long time, I rose from my bed, put on part of my clothes, and went around to the front of the mansion.

"And, now, here, sir, is something which I feel that I ought to tell you, but which I could never rightly believe myself, although I believed that I saw it with my own eyes."

"What was it?"

"When I went around the corner of the house—and I don't know why I did that, or what I could have expected to discover by doing so—somebody dashed out at the front door and ran down the steps to the street.

"I was so sure that it was Mr. Jere, that I called after him; but whoever the man was, he did not turn or appear to hear that I called, and after a moment he had turned the corner, and disappeared.

"I returned to the stable and to my own room then, greatly troubled, for I feared that the lad—as I always called him—had gone to see his father, and that he had utterly failed in what he wished to accomplish."

"What time was it when you returned to your room?"

"A quarter to three, sir. That was what troubled me. It did not seem possible that he could have been with his father all that time."

"What did you do then?"

"I went to sleep, sir, and did not waken until I felt a hand on my shoulder and opened my eyes to discover that my master was in my room. He was half dressed. He had come out there to me almost as soon as his valet had released him from the bonds he believed his son had placed upon him. He told me the entire story as he believed it, and he had not the slightest doubt that he had seen his son."

"Had you any doubt on that point?"

"What could I believe, sir? I have already told you what I knew about it; and when I had heard all that the old gentleman had to say on the subject, I could not understand it at all, for, frankly, I did not and do not believe that young Jere is capable of such a deed."

"I don't suppose you told the father of your experience with the son during the night."

"No, sir. I said not a word about it. But as soon as I could get away and be excused, I sought out the young man and I charged him with the affair exactly as I would have done had I entirely believed it.

"He was very indignant, and ended by ordering me from the house; but when I told him of the certainty that his father felt that he was the one, and of the fact that I had seen a person leaving the house shortly before three, whom I took to be none other than himself, he was disposed to forgive me, which he did.

"I want to assure you, Mr. Carter, that he swore on his honor and on the truth of everything he held sacred in the world, that he knew nothing about the affair, and that he had not the least idea who could have masqueraded in his name and person."

"And did you never undertake to tell the truth—as you understood the truth to be—to the father?"

"Many times; but he would not let me proceed. The thing was a closed incident with him. He would not hear the name of his son mentioned. He told that story to the papers, as you know, and he acted as if his son were dead."

"And now," said the detective, "you assure me that the son has lived in this country all the time. That he has not been abroad at all, as his father believed him to be, eh?"

"He has been abroad—every year, I think; but he has made his home on this side. I have seen him frequently."

"James, do you happen to know where he could be found at this moment?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

Nick Carter left his chair and walked toward the door.

There he paused; and, turning, he said:

"Inspector, I think I will leave you here in charge, and go with this man to find young Jere Jones. Don't you think that should be done? And at once?"

"By all means. Find him and bring him here, to this house. In the meantime I will have sent for the coroner,

and have done a little investigating on my own account. It begins to look as if we had found something tangible after all."

CHAPTER IX.

HIDE-AND-SEEK WITH THE DEAD.

The detective had one hand on the knob of the door, and was, in fact, in the act of leaving the room, when the inspector called to him.

"Wait a moment, Nick," he said. "I had forgotten one thing."

"What is that."

"Well, I think that the son of the man who lies murdered up-stairs can wait for your arrival until after you have had an opportunity to go over this house with me. You will remember that thus far I have seen only the front hall and this room. You have been pretty well through the house, and I think you had better act as my guide before you go away."

"All right. Shall we go now?"

"Yes."

"Then come ahead."

Rawson would have followed them from the room, but the inspector signed to him to wait, and outside he told the officers to stay where they were until they were called upon; then he followed the detective up the winding stairs to the second floor.

At the top of the stairs he drew Nick through the first door he could see, which proved to be another than that one where the body of the murdered man was lying upon the bed; and as soon as they had passed through, he stopped and said:

"Nick, before we go any farther in this affair, tell me what you think of that coachman."

The detective fixed his eyes upon the inspector, and slowly—very slowly, indeed—a smile spread over his countenance, as he said, in reply:

"I am mighty glad that you have asked that question, Steve."

It was the inspector's turn to smile, as he asked in return:

"Did you suppose that I wouldn't see it, Nick?"

"No; but I wanted you to see it in order to convince me that I was right."

"Well, then answer the question. Tell me what you think about that coachman."

"To tell you the truth, Steve, I am not at all sure of what I do think about him. I am only positive about one thing concerning him."

"And that is——?"

"That he was not born, bred, reared, and educated for the calling of a coachman."

"Right."

"And this last talk with him has opened up one or two new ideas concerning him."

"For example——?"

"Well, for example, it hardly seems characteristic of the old man, Jeremy Jones, judging only from what I have seen of him, that he should select his coachman for his confidant, and should rush out to him the first one, after the trying experiences he is supposed to have undergone with his own son. I don't think the thing sounds logical, do you?"

"Not by several mill-sites, I do not!"

"What do *you* think about the man, Steve?"

"I think, without reservation of any kind, that he is about the biggest and at the same time the slickest fraud that I have come in contact with in a long time. Is that sufficiently plain?"

"It sounds very much to the point."

"But now," continued the inspector, "the question arises, Who and what is he?"

"Exactly."

"And what is his game?"

"It strikes me that his game is very easy to see."

"Well, what do you make it out?"

"The principal feature of his game at the present moment, is to fool us."

"Precisely; and he thinks that he can do it."

"More than that, he believes that he *is* doing it."

"That brings me back again to the question, Who and what is he?"

The detective was silent for some time before he replied, and when at last he did so, it was with pronounced hesitation.

"I will confess," he said, "that the whole affair puzzles me more than I care to admit, almost. The conduct of the fellow has been so paradoxical that it is difficult to put your finger upon a single circumstance without discovering that there is another one ready at hand to contradict its suggestion."

"Go on, Nick."

"All the same, it is quite evident that he is posing. There are many circumstances which not only suggest but which seem to carry out the idea that the fellow is in league with the outfit that is turning this house into a shambles, and we have in opposition to that, the blow that he received from some sort of a missile as he was crossing the street to come to me. He was knocked down, and he was rendered senseless for a time; and there was no make-believe about that, either. It was real."

"What was it that hit him?"

Nick pondered a moment, and then he said:

"If the thing had happened on a battle-field, I should be able to swear that he was struck by a spent bullet; as it was, I am inclined to think that it was a round, lead bullet that hit him, but that instead of being shot from

the muzzle of a gun, it was propelled by a common bean-shooter."

The inspector smiled. Then he thrust a hand into one of his pockets and brought forth a round pellet of lead, the size of a forty-four-caliber bullet and held it out toward the detective.

"As we drove up to the door," he said, "I happened to see this thing lying in the gutter. I picked it up for no reason at all other than that I found it; but the moment I knew about the accident to Rawson, it occurred to me that it was the thing that hit him; and now it only goes to prove that your idea is the correct one."

"But even that does not reply to your question."

"No; go ahead, Nick."

"Did you ever see old Jeremy Jones' son?"

"I can't say that I ever did."

"Do you suppose that this fellow Rawson is really the son?"

The inspector shook his head.

"The question has occurred to me more than once, but it does not seem likely. Do you believe that that shrewd old man could have been imposed upon so easily?"

"No; I do not—unless he was a party to the imposition."

"What do you mean? That he consented to be fooled?"

"No; not exactly that. But it has occurred to me that he did know that the coachman was his son in disguise, and that for reasons of his own he chose to let it appear that he did *not* know it. That is, always supposing that Rawson is the son."

"But there were the mother and the sisters."

Nick looked up quickly.

"By Jove, Steve!" he exclaimed. "I think you have given me the key to the whole thing in that remark; and I'll admit that the significance of it had utterly escaped me until your words brought it to mind."

"What do you mean, Nick?"

"I mean a lot of things. Listen to me to the end, will you?"

"Sure. Go on."

"First, then, we have no means of proving that Rawson has not told us the truth. He has stated that he has been in the employ of the old man fifteen years, and that may or may not be true. We have no means of establishing a contrary fact. The old man is dead; the mother and sisters are on the ocean, on their way to Europe, and in all likelihood there is not a servant in that house across the street who has been there a year."

"Well?"

"We don't even know that this coachman is the same man who came into this house this morning with the old man, when the murder of the man Gardner and his wife was discovered."

"That is true, too."

"There is an awful big nigger in the wood-pile somewhere, Steve."

"Right you are; and the wool is mostly growing on the head of that coachman down-stairs," was the instant reply.

"Sure; and the thing is, shall we clap him into a cell at once, and give him the sweat-box and the third and fourth degrees—or shall we let him undertake to lead you to the 'erring son'?"

"I think the latter idea is the better one."

"All right. We will act upon that and let the sequel prove what it will. Conjecture won't aid as much just at this point, while a little fact will."

"Exactly."

"Now, Nick, suppose we take a look at the body of the old man."

The detective's smile was almost a grin, as he replied slowly:

"Steve, I haven't the least idea that it is where I left it."

"Eh? No? Is that so? Do you suppose that they have made off with it again?"

"I haven't a doubt of it. I think that is a part of the game."

"Those fellows, whoever they are, will be getting quite a collection of cadavers before long, won't they?"

"It would seem so; but come ahead."

They left the room in which they had been talking and crossed the hall; but the instant they pushed open the door into the other room—the room where the body of the old man had last been seen—an unpleasant odor assailed them, and they both started back rather precipitately at what they saw.

"What the devil do you suppose it all means, anyhow?" asked the inspector in amazement.

And well might he ask the question; and well might the detective be puzzled how to reply, for the ways of the mysterious people who took delight in playing hide-and-seek with the corpses of their victims were beyond understanding.

Both of the twin beds were occupied now.

On one of them, lying closely side by side, were the bodies of a man and a woman—and those were the two which, as yet, the detective had been utterly unable to discover—and on the other, exactly where it had last been seen, was the corpse of Jeremy Jones.

"Will you stand right where you are for a moment?" asked Nick of the inspector.

"Sure."

Nick stepped to the top of the stairs and called down to the policemen.

"Two of you come up here," he ordered; and as soon as they appeared he stationed them at the door of the room wherein the dead bodies were lying.

"I want you two to remain where you are until you

are relieved," he said sharply. "There must not be a moment when one or both of you have not your eyes fixed upon those dead bodies, and I warn you now that they are very likely to get up and walk away at any moment—at least, somebody is likely to walk away with them if you don't keep a sharp lookout. I want you both to keep your guns in your hands, and to shoot, without warning, the first living man or woman, or thing, that you see in that room. Do you understand?"

They admitted that they did.

"When the coroner arrives," continued the detective, "he will take charge, and after that the game will be up to him. You will take your orders from him. Is that right, inspector?"

"Perfectly."

"Then let's get down-stairs. I confess I am rather anxious to find out what Rawson means when he proposes to take me to find young Jones."

The detective and the inspector descended the stairs together. Nick Carter opened the door to the library and stepped inside, closely followed by O'Brien—and then they stopped.

There was nobody there.

Rawson, the coachman, had disappeared.

The inspector turned quickly to the two officers who remained on guard outside the door.

"Where did that coachman go?" he demanded; but the men only stared at him, while one of them replied:

"He didn't go anywhere, sir. He hasn't come out of that room since you did."

And then the inspector and the detective stared at each other—and smiled.

There was only one door to the library—the one in which they were standing, and the same that the officers had been watching; and yet the coachman had managed to leave the room without being seen.

CHAPTER X.

A BULLET OUT OF THE DARKNESS.

The inspector stepped again into the hall, and, after giving a few orders to one of his men, he returned, closing the door after him.

Then he took two cigars from his pocket, and extending one of them to Nick, he remarked:

"While we await the arrival of the coroner—let's smoke."

After that, for a long time, neither of the two men uttered a sound, and only an occasional motion of an arm as the ashes were flicked from a cigar, and the curling smoke over their heads, told that they were awake.

But the eyes of the two men were busy for all that.

Any one watching them would have discovered that they were working out the same thoughts, and that they were proceeding on about the same plan.

Nick Carter was seated in such a position that he faced the eastern wall of the room; the one, in fact, through which the doorway to the hall was cut; the inspector sat facing him, and consequently his eyes were toward the western wall—and this one was lined with book shelves that had been built into the wall, the top one being approximately six feet from the floor.

It may as well be explained here, that these book shelves covered all four sides of the room to that height, save only in that place at the eastern wall where the door had been cut through to the hall, and also a place at the northern side, where there was a huge chimney and fireplace—and this latter stood out into the room.

The light—and it was soft and pleasant to the eyes—was admitted from the ceiling, and came through a series of convex windows of ground glass. In just what manner it was conveyed to those windows from the outside, did not then appear. It was doubtless due to one of the many marvels of architecture of the building.

After a considerable time, the detective rose quietly in his place and turned his chair so that he faced the western wall; and the inspector turned his own chair about, so that the two men now sat with their backs toward each other.

Another interval passed in silence, and then another move was made.

Each man turned his chair again; and now Nick Carter faced the northern wall, and the inspector studied the one toward the south.

Then came a third move, and these last positions were reversed; the inspector faced the north wall, and the detective the south wall.

And then, as if with mutual understanding, and almost at the same instant, the two abruptly brought their chairs around again face to face, and their eyes met.

At that very instant, and before either of them could speak, there was a rap against the panel of the door, and in reply to Nick's call, the door opened and the coroner entered.

"Hello, inspector! Good morning, Carter!" he said briskly. "I was at home when your message arrived, so I came directly here. I am informed that three murders have taken place in this house; is that true?"

"Quite true," replied Nick, speaking for both; and then he turned so that he faced the chief of the detective bureau, and nodded his head significantly.

The inspector rose in his place.

"Come ahead, coroner," he said. "I will show you around a bit and tell you the story of this affair as we go. Mr. Carter prefers to remain here, alone, for a few moments."

As they were leaving the room, Nick called out to him:

"Lock the door, Steve, and take the key with you, please."

An instant later he was alone.

But he did not at once leave his chair.

Instead, he remained where he was for quite a long time, with his head leaning back against the cushions of the chair, and with his eyes closed tightly together.

It was one of Nick Carter's methods when he wished to concentrate.

After a considerable interval, however, he rose and crossed the room toward the west wall, and he began at once to move the books from the shelves to the floor.

Nor did he take the trouble to pile them systematically behind him. He merely dropped them upon the floor, permitting them to fall where they would, until they were strewn in many chaotic heaps along the entire length of the room.

In this manner he rapidly removed every book from the three shelves, counting from the top down, along that side of the room—but still he had not discovered what he searched for.

If the secret entrance to a secret passageway were in that room, it plainly was not located on that side.

But the detective was patient.

He left the books where he had placed them, and crossed the room to the east side; but he stopped suddenly before he had removed a book, and, for the first time, uttered his thoughts aloud.

"What is the use of going to all this trouble?" he mused. "There is an entrance to the secret passages from this room, and I ought to know exactly where it is located—but the fact remains that I do not, and that, study as I may, I cannot find a spot along the tops of these books where the collected dust has been disturbed.

"Now, if two or three certain books had to be removed in order to reach the spring which works that secret entrance to the passage, such book ought easily to be discovered—and I have got to admit that there are no such books here.

"Every book in this room is new. I don't believe that one of them has been opened since they were placed on the shelves; and so it follows that this process that I have begun, of taking all the books from the shelves, is manifestly useless."

He halted where he stood and let his eyes rove around the room, following the walls over the tops of the book shelves; but everywhere he encountered only a blank wall, paneled in quartered oak.

"Those panels would afford an excellent opportunity for what I seek," he thought, "only for the fact that they are too high away from the floor, and no sane person who wished to make use of a secret passage would ever make the entrance to it so difficult as that would be. Now, suppose I take a good look at the top of those shelves."

He liked this idea, and the next thing was how to get at the top of them the easiest. He only wished to search along them, from one end to another, for the existence of a possible spring, or lever.

The table in the center of the room attracted his attention, and with a sweep of his arm he pushed everything that it contained to the floor, for he was becoming impatient.

That done, he essayed to move the table. It was heavy, to be sure—rather massive in construction, but he was nevertheless surprised when he seized upon it, to find that it did not budge from its place when he attempted to shove it along the floor.

He tried pushing against the other end of it, then; but again it resisted his efforts.

"That's funny," he remarked to himself. "I wonder if I can lift the thing?"

He seized hold of one end of it and lifted straight up; and, to his surprise, it seemed this time to be not heavy at all, but came up readily in his grasp—and seemed of its own accord to be ready to swing to one side; that is, in a certain direction.

He let it swing—or rather, he assisted it to swing—and it went half-way around before it stopped suddenly, as if it had struck against a solid substance to hinder its further motion.

It now stood directly across the room; that is, at right angles from its regular position, and the detective stood regarding it, without raising his eyes, but with a keen smile on his face, while he muttered:

"So! The secret is here, is it? In the very simplest place in the world, and, therefore, the very last one where I should have searched for it."

He raised his eyes then, and turned squarely around so that he faced the east wall; and the smile on his face broadened, as well it might have done.

A section of the book shelves, from which he had already removed nearly all the books, had, with the moving of the table in the center of the floor, swung outward into the room, and thus it had revealed a narrow opening, nearly as wide as an ordinary doorway; an opening with an unmistakable passageway beyond it—an opening, in fact, which must, of necessity, ultimately lead to an explanation of the mysteries of that house.

"I need not have moved all those books," murmured the detective; "but all the same, I do not think that I will just now take the trouble to replace them."

He rose and stepped cautiously across the room toward the secret passageway.

He leaned forward and peered into it.

He saw that there was a space that was nearly three feet in width between the walls, and that it led away toward the north end of the room; that is, toward that end at which the chimney was situated.

Next, he examined the opening that the moving of the table from its place had caused to appear, and he discovered that a sliding door was made to disappear behind the book shelves, and that there was a handle on the inside of it, which made it easily worked from that side.

He reached out and closed the door—himself remaining within the room—and he was not at all surprised to see that the table swung back into place again, and appeared as if it had not been moved—but he had to step back out of the way of the shelves, as they, also, swung into place.

"That is about the slickest thing in the way of secret passages and methods for reaching them, that I have ever seen," he commented, again approaching the table, and once more lifting it and swinging it, and thus again opening the secret door.

He stopped and smiled as he looked around the room.

"I almost wish that the books were back again in place," he mused. "It would puzzle the inspector, when he returns, to know how I got out of the room. It will puzzle him anyhow, for I don't believe that he was any nearer a solution of the puzzle when he went out with the coroner, than I was."

The question in the mind of the detective now, was whether he should wait for the return of the inspector before attempting to explore the passage, or if he should proceed without him.

It must be admitted that all his inclinations pointed to the latter course, while he believed that it was his duty to wait.

But the temptation was strong to proceed.

If he had not told the inspector to close and lock the door after him, it is more than likely that he would have opened it and called to O'Brien; he even started forward to do that very thing, when he remembered that the door was locked.

"What's the use?" he asked himself. "More than likely I will have returned before he is through with the coroner. I think I will go ahead."

He removed his small search-light from its place of concealment in one of his pockets, for he had no doubt that the passageways through and between the walls of the house would be dark; and he also drew one of his revolvers, and carried it in his other hand as he approached the secret entrance.

The detective had already received sufficient proof of the desperate character of the men who were in that house, who seemed to delight in murder, as if it were a pastime; and he had not the slightest doubt that they would attempt to kill him on sight.

The only surprise to him was that the attempt had not been made while he was still alone in the house, and before assistance arrived; the greatest surprise, now that he was convinced of the association of the coachman with the criminals, was that they had not attempted to kill him while he was alone with Rawson, and, therefore, practically at their mercy; and then he remembered that they could not have known his scrap of a message over the telephone had been understood, and, therefore, supposed that they could take their own time in murdering the detective.

"It was a lucky thing for me, perhaps, that Steve O'Brien understood enough of that message to find this address," he mused as he moved over toward the passageway. "Well, here goes anyhow. I'll see a little of the mystery of this passage, and then get back here before the inspector returns."

He stepped through the secret door, and was in the act of closing it behind him. Indeed, it had almost clicked shut when out of the black darkness ahead of him there was a flash and a thunderous report, and the detective pitched forward on his face.

At the same instant the secret door closed—and we already know that the table in the middle of the room also swung back into its usual place.

CHAPTER XI.

HONEYCOMBED WITH SECRET PASSAGES.

It was at the very instant of this happening, that Inspector O'Brien placed his key in the library door and opened it.

Had he not been at that very point, and had he not already had the door on the swing, he would not even have heard the sound of the pistol-shot, for the great thickness of the walls of the house would have prevented that.

As it was, however, he did hear it, and he leaped into the room quickly enough after it, to know from which side of the room it had proceeded, and also to smell the pungent odor of powder smoke.

To his amazement, the room was empty.

He had fully expected to find the detective engaged in a hand-to-hand encounter with some person or persons.

But there was nobody there; the room was empty.

He knew that Nick could not have left it save by the same method that the supposed coachman had employed, and he realized that it was now up to him to discover that method with the least possible delay, since it was evident to him that Nick had been attacked.

The thought that came to him was that the secret door had been opened without the knowledge of the detective, and that he had been attacked from behind, and then dragged into the secret closet, or whatever it was that afforded an egress from that room, other than by the doorway.

The heaped-up and scattered books on the floor did not surprise him, for he understood at once that that was the result of the detective's search for the passageway.

The coroner and one of the officers had followed him into the room, and now they stood staring while the inspector leaped toward the wall from behind which he knew the sound of the pistol-shot to have proceeded.

Drawing his own revolver, he pounded with the butt of it against the wall, but it gave forth no sound that afforded him any information; and, almost in the same breath, he called out to the two men behind him:

"Bring that table over here!"

They both seized it at the same time—and, fortunately, they attempted to move it in exactly the right direction. The result was that they worked the secret spring, and the passageway stood open before them; and that within less than a minute of time since the report of the pistol had sounded through the room.

Stephen O'Brien did not stand upon the order of his going—but he went.

The instant that the section of wall was open before him, he leaped toward it, and passed through into the passageway.

The very second that his foot crossed the space that took him partly inside the enclosure, there came a second pistol-shot, and a bullet flattened itself against the wall within an inch of his head—and in that same instant he returned the fire, sending a bullet of his own into the darkness toward the spot from whence the other shot had proceeded.

And he did not draw back, either.

He dashed on into the passage, careless of other bullets that might be fired at him, and seemingly indifferent as to whether he should be hit or not.

But there were no more shots.

The man who had fired at him evidently thought that discretion was the better part of valor, and had fled—and it was fortunate, too, that he had done so, for at that instant the inspector stumbled and fell headlong to the floor.

He scrambled to his feet instantly.

He had fallen over the prostrate body of a human being, and he realized instantly that it could belong to no other than Nick Carter.

It was too dark to see anything inside that passage, but as he regained his feet, the inspector seized upon the body of the person he had fallen over, and dragged it with him toward the opening.

In much less time than it requires in the telling, he was outside again, and within the library room; and he had dragged the body of Nick Carter with him—and Nick sat up and began to wipe the blood from his face as he did so.

"Thank God you are alive!" exclaimed the inspector.

"Very much alive," replied Nick, somewhat ruguriously. "All the same I'm a trifle knocked out."

"That is no bullet wound!" said the inspector, drawing nearer, and bending down over the detective.

"Who said it was? Who said anything about a bullet?" asked Nick. "Help me to my feet, will you?"

"Better stay where you are for a moment," was the reply. "I thought you were shot, old fellow."

"No," said Nick. "I did not even hear a shot, although I suppose you did, from what you say about it. Something fell on me. I think it was a rock, or something like that. It hit me here;" and he placed one hand against his forehead, from which the skin had been knocked away. "If somebody shot at me, somebody missed me."

It was true.

Just inside the passage they discovered a large, square stone which had fallen upon the detective's head, and a little further search revealed the fact that the rock was a part and parcel with their secret passage, and had been arranged so that a novice upon entering the place, would dislodge it, and it would fall crashing upon his head.

It was this very fact that had saved the detective's life, too.

The rock had fallen upon him just in time to knock him out of the way of the bullet that had been fired at him from the darkness; and it appeared that the only reason why he had not dislodged it and fallen a victim to it the first time he passed through that secret door, was that he had not pushed the book shelves far enough back to work the trap.

As it was, he received a stunning blow, and had for the moment been rendered insensible; otherwise, he was uninjured, save for the bruise and the barking of the skin of his forehead.

"I'm all right now," he said, "and I think we had best see the end of this thing at once. It strikes me that we have fallen upon a regular mare's nest, Steve."

"It does look like it."

"There seems to be an army of thugs in this place."

"I don't care now if there are a hundred of them," replied the inspector. "I have got the house surrounded. I sent to the station for the reserves, and they are here. If anybody leaves this house, or the vicinity of it without being held up now, he'll be a lulu, and don't you forget it. Come on, Nick; are you ready?"

"Yes; only let me go ahead."

"Not on your life. I'll take the lead this time."

"Look here, Steve, it is my case."

"I don't care if it is. You can follow me."

"Here! Wait a minute! I'll match you."

"For what?"

"To see who leads. It's only fair. We both want to lead, and——"

"All right. Heads, or tails?" and the inspector flipped a coin into the air.

"Heads!" called Nick; and the coin fell that way.

"Good!" said the detective, laughing, for he was now entirely himself again; and he sprang into the secret passage without a second's hesitation.

The inspector followed closely upon his heels, and behind him came the officer. The coroner brought up the rear, for he was not at all backward in seeing the adventure to the end.

"If there is any more killing done," he called out, "I'll be there to sit on the corpse on the spot," he called out. "That is the way they do things at Mexican bull-fights, and we may as well copy them for once."

The passageway led them to the corner of the library, where it turned and passed, evidently behind the chimney.

It was from this turn, evidently, that the bullet had been fired; but now there was no one there to shoot at them.

A short distance beyond, there was a second turn, and just after that, a narrow stairway led toward the upper part of the building.

The detective made constant use of his light as they proceeded, but nowhere, until after they had ascended the stairway, did they discover evidence of a means of getting out of the passageway into any part of the house.

But not far from the top of the stairs, they found a door not unlike the inner side of the one that had admitted them from the library.

This the detective at once threw open, for the method of doing so from the inside was very simple and easily worked.

It opened upon the hall under the dome, on the second floor, and directly opposite the spot where Nick had halted for a considerable time during one part of his investigation.

The detective left this door open, and passed on.

The way now led them around until they had made almost the entire circuit of the great hall, and then another door was found which opened into the sleeping-room where the bodies were still upon the beds, and where now there were three officers on guard over them.

This doorway was also left invitingly open, and the attention of the officers was called to it.

It does not seem necessary that we should follow them in their search of the secret passages throughout the entire house. It is sufficient to say the statement that "the place was honeycombed with secret passages," had been entirely correct.

In fact there was not a wall inside that house which had not been made double, so that a passageway could be constructed between the two.

Even the outer walls were the same; and there were ingenious methods of entering and leaving every room in the building from the passages.

Also there were frequent flights of narrow stone steps, some of which led up to the floor above, while others took them again to the main floor from which they had started.

And so progressing, after a time they discovered that they had followed the passages around the entire house, and through it, on each of the three floors; they had discovered entrances to each and every room, each cunningly concealed; they had discovered many traces of the recent presence of persons in those passages—but nowhere had they seen or heard a sign of a human being other than that.

Each of the doors that had been discovered and opened had been left ajar, and a policeman was called in each case to mount guard over it, so it followed that the men they were seeking could not all this time be playing hide-and-seek with them, by flitting from one room to another, and by dodging in and out after the manner of the Hanlon-Lees in their "*Voyage en Suisse.*"

Plainly there was another means of escape from those passages which had not yet been discovered—and search as they might, they could not find it.

At last they all stopped again at the library entrance, having made the circuit of the secret passages several times, and each time with more care; and the two officers looked at each other, puzzled.

"Well, Nick, what do you make of it?" asked the inspector.

"Why, I make this—and this only: We haven't found a way yet to the cellar—and there must be one somewhere. Don't you think so?"

"It would seem so."

"And wherever that is, it is also the way they have gone."

"Right enough. Come on; let's find it."

"I think it is from this room," said Nick. "This seems to be the head and center of the whole thing, and I propose that we tear this room apart but what we find it."

"Done, old man. Done! We will find it, too, in another jiffy."

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIES ARE EXPLAINED.

The conversation just recorded occurred in the library, as we already know; and there were five individuals present when it took place.

They were: Nick Carter, Inspector O'Brien, the coroner, the captain of the police precinct and the detective-sergeant who had accompanied the two detectives from the first.

They were standing at the time, so that they surrounded the library table—that article of such significant uses in the revelations that had already taken place.

Just now, the table was turned at right angles to its usual position, for the door through the wall behind the book shelves was open, and, therefore, the way into the secret passage was clear.

It was only natural that while Nick and the inspector,

were talking together, that the eyes of their companions should be fixed upon them, and likewise that their own eyes were directed toward one another.

It is certain that not one of the five was looking toward the entrance to the secret passage while the two were speaking, and particularly as the closing remark of the conversation was made by the inspector when he said:

"We will find it, too, in another jiffy."

It was because none of them were looking in the right direction that they were all inordinately startled, just as the inspector made that remark, by the sound of another voice from directly behind them, and they turned as with one impulse, to face the secret door.

It was a loud, shrill laugh that had come to them so unexpectedly—just such a laugh as that which the detective had already heard several times since entering that house earlier in the day; and as they turned, they beheld one of the most remarkable apparitions—so far as appearances could go—that any of them had ever seen off the stage.

Standing there, framed by the secret doorway, and with the dense blackness for a background, was an individual who was made up exactly after the pattern of a clown in a circus; or, if the simile will be more apparent, he looked exactly like the pictures of the Zu Zu advertisements.

There was the snow-white, enameled face, the white, peaked cap, the fiery red lips, the intensely black brows, the half-moon blotches of red on the cheeks, the white, tight-fitting coat spangled with gilded stars, the haubergues of blue also spangled with stars, the white tights covering the legs, and finally the enameled white hands outstretched toward the group, and each one holding a big black revolver in its grasp, while the muzzles of each of them wavered and trembled, seeming in an instant of time to travel over and across the region of every heart there.

In fact, the apparition in the doorway covered them all with his deadly weapons, at the same instant.

"Don't move—any of you," said the individual thus queerly introduced upon the scene. "I have not a particle of doubt that you would kill me in the end, but one or two of you would get hurt before you accomplished it, so don't try. Besides, I am here to save you any further trouble in searching for me, so you had best listen to what I have to say. Now, if you will all take seats and place your hands on the top of that table—well, we will be more comfortable so, and I won't have any doubts about your taking or not taking a snap-shot at me. While you are doing that, I will disappear, just to prove to you that I can do it, and when, through my peep-hole I find that you have done as I say, I'll appear again."

He stepped back as he ceased speaking, and instantly the secret door closed between him and the men in the room; and that without in the least disturbing the table which had hitherto been supposed to be inseparably connected with it.

"Come," said Nick, drawing up a chair. "I think we had better do as he suggests."

The others followed his example, and in a moment they had arranged themselves along the side of the library table with their arms outstretched upon it—and then the secret door opened again, and the apparition reappeared.

"That is very good of you," he said. "I didn't suppose that you would be so ready to obey, and it shows your good sense that you have done so."

He paused an instant, looked them over solemnly, and then burst into another peal of laughter, so wild and so uncanny that Nick and the inspector looked at each other and nodded their heads, for here, they thought, was a direct confirmation of another of the ideas that they held in common, which was that the mysterious house was infested by madmen.

But the laughter ceased as suddenly as it had commenced, and the strange-looking man again addressed them calmly.

"Which of you is Nick Carter?" he demanded.

"I," replied Nick.

"You, eh? Well, you have been here in the house, in my domain, nearly all day, so I think I will address my remarks to you."

Nick nodded, and he continued:

"First, I want to relieve your minds about one thing. James Rawson is not concerned in this business at all; nor is his young master, Jeremy Jones, junior, both of whom you have suspected, so you might as well disabuse your minds of that idea at once. They are as innocent of the crimes that have been committed in this house, or of knowledge of them, as you are.

"Second, when I have got all through with my talk, and you have thoroughly searched a certain part of this house, to which I shall direct you when I have done, you will find them both awaiting you; and you will discover that they are in a predicament, which if you do not hasten, after I have permitted you to move, must soon end in their death.

"Third, I have committed enough murders lately. I am getting tired of it. I started out to count my victims by the score, just for the sake of getting up a little excitement, but I find that it does not pay, and, mad as I am, I have a heart so tender that when I recover my senses again, and am in control of my impulses, I find that—well, I don't like to think about it.

"You see it was entirely unnecessary that I should have murdered that poor young man and his bride of a few months. It is true that they had discovered the way into the secret passages, and were making it rather uncomfortable for me, and it is true that I could not frighten them as I had done the others who have tried to live here, by walking in upon them at night, dressed in this garb, and by laying kid gloves filled with water across their faces, and doing other things to make them believe that the house was haunted by the dead. All the same, I need not have killed them—only I couldn't help it.

"You do not know who I am, do you? You haven't the remotest idea, have you? Old Jeremy Jones, whom I choked to death and whose neck I broke at the same time, so suddenly that you, Nick Carter, could not catch me at it, never told you that he had another son, did he?

"Well, he did have one—long, long ago; six years before young Jeremy was born. That was I. It doesn't sound real, does it? But it is the truth. I am young Jere's brother, although I am not a twin and I do not look in the least like him. All the same, I made myself look enough like him so that in the half dark of the old man's room, he could not tell the difference—and, besides, he thought that I was dead long ago. He thought I was drowned in a pond not far from an asylum for the insane, where I was confined; but that was a part of my plan of escape, and it worked to a charm.

"Nobody knew about me but Jere and the old man, and the mother. The girls never knew. I decided not to kill my mother or the girls, because they are women, but I made up my mind to put the old man and Jere out of the way. I did it for the old man, but when it came to Jere—well, somehow I haven't done it. He's downstairs where you will find him after a little while.

"You see, when I escaped from the asylum where they had kept me ever since I was a mere boy, I resolved to be avenged. They had treated me well enough up there, and they had taught me to read and write, and I have always been sane enough about some things. But they would never let me out when I wanted to go and kill something, and that made me angry.

"All the same, I am Christopher Jones, brother of Jere Jones, and son of old Jeremy; and ever since I escaped from that asylum, long, long ago, I have been living around this neighborhood—never mind how or where, because if I should tell you, you would know.

"I have made my living by burglary, Mr. Carter, and I have always made it appear like the greatest mystery, when I have robbed anybody, so that I have never been suspected at all; and I've lived well, too.

"Then, when they were building these houses, I watched them at their work. I watched young Jere, too, and his friend the architect. I was almost looking over their shoulders when they had their young and foolish heads together, planning how they would make this house a perfect network of secret passages.

"That was only just a hobby of young Jere's, but the architect fell into his plans, and the old man never counted the extra cost at all, so that from the first the house was built this way, purposely; and they never knew how they were doing it for me; never guessed it at all, for it was made to apply to both houses, while it was really expended upon this one.

"I made up my mind then that I would come here to live, and that I would either kill Jere or drive him out, so that I could have it all to myself; but then that marriage business sent him away."

He paused long enough to break into another peal of laughter, and then he continued:

"Jere played into my hands there, didn't he? You didn't know that I always found a way to have keys to the old man's house, did you? Well, I did—and what is more, it was an easy matter to get duplicates of his keys at the bank and to read his combinations out of his memorandum-book, where he always jotted them down lest he would forget them. And then I made him believe that Jere had robbed him. It was fine. And the old man published him in the papers; that was finer. And then——

"Everybody who came to this house to live in it, I drove away. You wouldn't have remained here yourself, and then—*take that!*"

He fired his revolver straight at Nick Carter as he uttered those last two words, and with a wild shout of laughter, disappeared, closing the secret door after him.

But the bullet flew wide of its mark; and as he closed the door it did not latch.

Nick leaped forward and reached the door at a bound. He pushed it open and passed through just in time to discover the white form as it disappeared through a trap in the floor, and also in time to prevent the door from closing entirely.

He darted through it after the flying man, and a bullet

whizzed past his head again—and then Nick pitched headlong through the darkness into the cellar.

Just ahead of him, as he fell, another door in the wall of the cellar opened and a flood of light gleamed out, and the detective, recovering himself, sprang through it.

As he did so, the light went out, but he had his lantern ready, and in an instant it was in use—and then he came to a full stop.

He had nearly fallen over a white figure that was writhing upon the floor, in the last throes of death agony, a figure that appeared to be exactly the same as the one who had but now been talking to him.

Immediately beyond it, and securely chained to the wall were two other figures, while between them and the detective something smoked and hissed upon the floor; and one glance told Nick Carter that it was a rapidly burning fuse—a fuse with a dozen sticks of dynamite at the other end of it.

To place his heel upon it and extinguish it, was the work of a moment; and, again, to light the gas-jet that had been burning in the cellar, of another; and then he saw that one of the men chained to the wall was James Rawson, while the other was unmistakably the son of old Jeremy Jones. The likeness was so pronounced that the detective needed not to be told.

The third man—the man in white—had been stabbed through the heart, and was already dead, and for the moment Nick believed it to be the corpse of the mad brother.

But a mad peal of laughter sounded from an unseen place over their heads, and a voice shouted at him out of some obscure place:

"In an hour I will be dead, too; but you will never find my body."

* * * * * * *

Whether the madman did kill himself or not, Nick Carter did not know; but when a month had passed and nothing whatever had been seen or heard of him, it was generally supposed that he had done so.

The man in white who had been so suddenly struck dead in the cellar, was only another madman who had been his companion—nobody knew how long a time.

Jeremy Jones had been his mad brother's prisoner more than a week, and had been made to endure untold tortures during that time, and James, the coachman, had been easily captured by the madman while he was seated in the library awaiting the return of the detective and the inspector. He had been sincere in his promise to take Nick to the presence of his young master, for he supposed that he was at his home on Long Island all the time.

As for the strange house—it was razed to the ground, stone by stone, and the site of it was filled and covered by a block of houses extending from one corner of the street to the other; and the other house, where Jeremy Jones, senior, had resided, was let to strangers, and the entire Jones family that remained, reunited now, went abroad for an indefinite period.

THE END.

The next issue, No. 484, will be "A Battle Among the Clouds; or, Nick Carter's Criminal Client."

About the Early Numbers of

Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 150 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

The Price of The Merriwell Books is Ten Cents per Copy. At all Newsdealers

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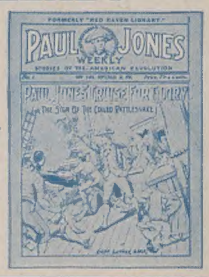

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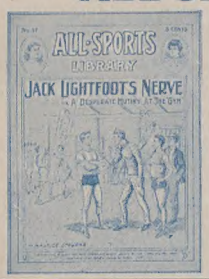

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